

CONTACT WITH WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION

Submitted by Secretariat

At IWC/62 in 2010 several Contracting Governments requested the Secretariat to re-activate communication with the World Health Organisation on the issue of levels of mercury and other toxins in cetacean meat which are intended for human consumption.

Accordingly the Secretary has corresponded with Dr Maged Younes (Director of Food Safety, Zoonoses and Foodborne Diseases) at the World Health Organisation on the issue of methyl mercury contamination of cetacean meat. Methyl mercury is the most toxic form of mercury contamination. Dr Younes confirmed that in 2006, the 67th meeting of the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives and Contaminants (JECFA) reaffirmed a Provisional Tolerable Weekly Intake (PTWI) of 1.6 µg/kg body weight to protect consumers of fish and other sea food. This limit was intended to include the protection of developing foetuses, the most sensitive subgroup of the population.

The JECFA also noted that advice targeted at population subgroups that may be at risk of methyl mercury exposure may provide an effective method for lowering the number of individuals with exposures greater than PTWI.

Further details on the WHO's evaluation of the PTWI for methyl mercury, including a link to the report of the 67th meeting of the JECFA can be found here:

<http://apps.who.int/ipsc/database/evaluations/PrintPreview.aspx?chemID=3083>

Dr Younes further reported that the 2006 assessment was based on published data and on the WHO/Global Monitoring System (GEMS/Food) which collects data and information from Member States on the occurrence of environmental contaminants (including mercury and methyl mercury) in foodstuffs. At the present time no information has been submitted specific to levels of mercury in cetacean meat.